

A Guide to the Papers of James Lawson Kemper 1823-1895

Papers of James Lawson Kemper 1823-1895
1823-1895

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Descriptive Summary

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4098

Language

English

Physical Characteristics

This collection consists of ca. 11,800 items.

Repository

Special Collections, University of Virginia Library

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Use Restrictions

See the [University of Virginia Library's use policy](#).

Acquisition Information

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Biographical/Historical Information

James Lawson Kemper (1823-1895), Confederate general and governor of Virginia, was born June 11, 1823, in Madison County, Virginia. He attended the Virginia Military Institute and Washington College, received his B.A. from the latter in 1842, and commenced practicing law a year later. At the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846 Kemper was commissioned a captain in the Virginia volunteers, but did not see active service. Returning to Virginia and his law practice, in 1853 he married Cremora Conway Cave, affectionately called "Belle" by her husband. They were to have six children. The same year Kemper was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates for the first of five terms, the last (1861-1863) as speaker of the house. He headed the committee on military affairs and was appointed president of the Board of Visitors at the Virginia Military Institute. In 1861 Kemper advocated calling the state convention that eventually declared Virginia's secession from the Union on April 17.

Kemper joined the Confederate army receiving a commission as colonel of the 7th Virginia Regiment on May 2, 1861. He led his regiment with great skill and valor at First Bull Run and Williamsburg, which resulted in his promotion to brigadier general on June 3, 1862. Commanding a brigade in the Army of Northern Virginia, he fought in the Seven Days Battles, Second Bull Run (where he temporarily commanded a division), Antietam, and Fredericksburg. After serving with Longstreet's First Corps in North Carolina during the Battle of Chancellorsville, he rejoined Lee's army as a brigade commander for the Gettysburg campaign in Pickett's division. At Gettysburg, Kemper led his brigade in the ill-fated Pickett's charge of July 3, 1863, and was severely wounded and captured. Returned on a prisoner exchange in 1864, he was deemed unfit for further field service, and was relegated to the command of the Virginia Reserves. Kemper was promoted to major general on September 19, 1864, and after Appomattox he was paroled by United States military authorities on May 2, 1865.

Kemper returned to his law practice and resumed his involvement in politics in Reconstruction-era Virginia. He favored reconciliation with the north with an eye to rebuilding Virginia's shattered economy by attaching railroads, commercial business, and industry to the Old Dominion. At first he opposed the reign of the Republican Party under President Ulysses S. Grant, attending the 1860 Democratic National Convention, and speaking for presidential candidate Horace Greeley in 1872. In 1873, with the support of General William "Billy" Mahone, the powerful postwar Conservative Party leader, Kemper captured the party nomination for governor, and won the ensuing election. His campaign made no attacks on the Grant administration, adopting a "wait-and-see" attitude. As John Scott wrote to Kemper on December 18, 1873 after taking to Grant, "when they have got the whites of Virginia as allies they can then let the negro go and will do it." Later, Kemper's support of Grant led to rumors of a Grant-Kemper ticket in 1876.

As governor Kemper urged full civil rights and protection for the freedmen. Believing that the state should pay its debts, Kemper broke with Mahone and joined the "Debt-payer" faction in fighting the "Readjustors" or "Repudiators" in state politics. He also fought for a new constitution and the restoration of Virginia to normal relations with the United States. After his term as governor, he returned to his law practice, and died in April 7, 1895, in Orange County, Virginia.

Scope and Content Information

The James Lawson Kemper papers contain the correspondence and the financial, legal, and political papers of James Lawson Kemper (1823-1895), lawyer, Confederate general, and governor of Virginia (1874-1877).

The correspondence series covers the years 1826 to 1905, with most material dating from the period between 1848 and 1895. Early letters (pre-1861) illustrate Kemper's growing law practice and his involvement in politics, culminating in five terms in the Virginia House of Delegates. Many letters pertain to national politics, including the presidential elections of 1852, 1856, and 1860, and mention such national figures as Stephen A. Douglas, James Buchanan, Henry A. Wise, and R. M. T. Hunter. State politics are discussed in detail, as are the improvement of the Virginia militia system, railroad construction, Kemper's dispute with Dr. George N. Thrift with threatened his political career, and military preparations in the south in the pre-Civil War period. The letters portray Kemper's importance in the political scene immediately prior to the outbreak of hostilities, and his leadership in calling for the state convention which led to Virginia's secession from the United States on April 17, 1861.

The correspondence from the period of Kemper's service in the Confederate army from 1861 to 1865 concerns the various commands he held throughout the conflict. Most of the material pertains to military operations in Virginia in 1861, including the first Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) on July 21, 1861. Correspondents and endorsements include Brigadier (later Lieutenant) General James B. Longstreet, Major General John B. Gordon, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and Major Walter H. Taylor, General Robert E. Lee's aide-de-camp. There is a letter from Major General Ethan A. Hitchcock, U.S.V., explaining to Kemper's wife Belle that she could not see her captured and badly wounded husband because Confederate authorities had refused the same courtesies to a Union family.

Correspondence from the years of Reconstruction, 1865 to 1877, concerns Kemper's investment speculations, legal business, recollections of the Battle of Gettysburg, and his political career, including his campaign and election to the governorship in 1873 on the Conservative Party ticket. Several letters from John A. Wise explain to Kemper why his father, a pre-war governor of Virginia Henry A. Wise, could not bring himself to endorse Kemper for the governorship. Much of the correspondence during his governorship concerns three topics: Kemper's veto of the Petersburg charter, which would have removed political power from the blacks residing there; the dispute over payment of the state debt; and Kemper's relations with President Ulysses S. Grant. There is a series of letters between Kemper and William Mahone, Confederate general and politician, regarding Kemper's choice of words in a speech attackign Mahone's stand on the state debt. Also included is a letter from Major General Fitz-John Parker, U.S.V., asking for evidence to be used in Porter's attempt to vindicate his conduct at Second Bull Run on August 29, 1862, for which he was later removed from command. Correspondents include ex-Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens, Conservative Party chairman Nathaniel B. Meade, John Scott of the pro-Grant faction in the Conservative Party, former Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early of the Southern Historical Society, and Democratic politicians and editor Manton Marble.

Most of the correspondence following Kemper's return to private life in 1878 until his death in 1895 regards personal affairs. Many letters concern the education of Kemper's children and their attempts to earn a living. Several letters refer to the disappearance of Kemper's son James, Kemper's attempts to collect on James' life insurance policy, and the efforts of the insurance company to recover the money when James turned up alive several years later. Other correspondence covers topics such as Kemper's farm, Virginia politics, and Confederate history. At the end of this section are several manuscripts written by Kemper relating to his estate, his will, and religious matters. Also included here are two drafts of Kemper's farewell address to his brigade in 1864, written after he had been wounded at Gettysburg and temporarily taken prisoner.

The series of financial papers, dating from 1843 to 1895, contains bills and receipts from Kemper's business transactions as a lawyer and a farmer. This series includes Kemper's account books, ledgers, and checkbooks.

The legal papers series, dating from 1854 to 1893, gives some idea of Kemper's law practice. Among the major topics are the estate settlements of R.A. Banks, Thomas Shirley, and Kemper's brother John S. Kemper, and Kemper's guardianship of Susan and William Matthews. Wills, bonds, deeds, court fees, licences, land surveys, bankruptcy notices, and arguments from several court cases are also included.

The series of political papers, dating from 1860 to 1876, includes a political scrapbook from the 1860 presidential campaign, Kemper's drafts of his annual messages as governor in 1874 and 1876, and an undated speech by John Massie on the state debt controversy.

The printed material series spans the years 1853 to 1985. It includes material on political campaigns, the Conservative Party, masonry, state militia affairs, schools, the Civil War and Reconstruction. Also included are several advertisements, and a copy of a speech by Kemper upon the presentation of the first Jackson-Hope medals at Virginia Military Institute. Several photographs of Kemper and his children are at the end of this section followed by one box of Kemper's books and four boxes of unsorted envelopes and fragments of letters.

Organization

The collection is organized into seven series: correspondence, manuscripts, financial papers, legal papers,

political papers, printed material and photographs. The legal series is arranged alphabetically according to topic and chronologically within each folder. All other series are arranged in chronological order, except where Kemper arranged some of his accounts in alphabetical order. Ledgers are located at the end of the collection.

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Correspondence

Correspondence 1826-1854

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Scope and Content

14 folders

Correspondence 1855-1858

Box 2

Scope and Content

10 folders

Correspondence 1859-1866

Box 3

Scope and Content

10 folders

Correspondence 1867-1870 Jun

Box 4

Scope and Content

9 folders

Correspondence 1870 Jul - 1871 Aug

Box 5

Scope and Content

9 folders

Correspondence 1871 Sep - 1872

Box 6

Scope and Content

8 folders

Correspondence 1873

Box 7

Scope and Content

7 folders

Correspondence 1874 Jan - Mar

Box 8

Major General Fitz-John Porter, U.S.V. to James Lawson Kemper 1874 Mar 10

Box 8

Scope and Content

re request for information about Second Battle of Bull Run and Court of Inquiry about Porter's conduct at the battle on August 29, 1862, for which he was courtmartialled

Correspondence 1874 Apr - 1877

Box 8

Scope and Content

7 folders

Correspondence 1878 - 1879 Sep

Box 9

Scope and Content

6 folders

Correspondence 1879 Oct - 1882

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9 folders

Correspondence 1883-1889

Box 11

Scope and Content

6 folders

Correspondence 1890-1895

Box 12

Scope and Content

7 folders

Correspondence 1896-1905, n.d.

Box 13

Scope and Content

2 folders

Manuscripts

Farewell Address to Kemper's Brigade 1864

Box 13

Kemper's Joke Book n.d.

Box 13

Kemper's Will, various drafts and related papers n.d.

Box 13

Maps of Kemper's estate n.d.

Box 13

re Religion n.d.

Box 13

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Box 13

Bills and Receipts 1861-1880

Box 13

Bills and Receipts 1870-1886

Box 13

Bills and Receipts 1880-1889

Box 13

Bills and Receipts 1886-1895, n.d.

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4 folders

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Box 14

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Box 14

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Box 14

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Box 14

James Lawson Kemper's dealings with "Kinderhook" lands 1868-1888

Box 14

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Box 14

J. L. Kemper, Jr.'s Expenses at Episcopal High School 1880

Box 15

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Box 15

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Box 15

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Box 15

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Box 15

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Box 15

Banks' Estate, Final Settlement 1881-1886

Box 15

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Box 15

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Box 15

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Box 15

Court Papers, Licences, and Fees 1868-1889

Box 15

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Box 16

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Box 16

Hutchinson v Simms 1868-1872

Box 16

Kemper and McMullen firm dissolved 1881-1889

Box 16

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Box 16

Kemper v Polk 1891-1839

Box 16

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Box 16

McIntire v McIntire 1806-1893

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Box 17

1874 Governor's Annual Message, James Lawson Kemper's draft 1874
Box 17

1876 Governor's Annual Message, James Lawson Kemper's draft 1876
Box 17

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Box 17

Speech of John E. Massie on State Debt Controversy n.d.
Box 17

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Box 17

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Box 17

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Box 17

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Box 17

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Box 17

Newspaper Clippings 1873-1889
Box 17

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Box 17

Photographs n.d.

Box 17

Ledgers

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Law Notes, Memoranda, and Scattered Accounts 1846-1871

Box 18

Account Books 1849-1873

Box 18

Scope and Content

2 items

Account Books 1857-1894

Box 19

Scope and Content

2 items

Memoranda Books 1859-1867

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Scope and Content

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Letter Press Copybook 1871-1875

Box 19

Cash Books 1872-1895

Box 19

Scope and Content

2 items

Check Books 1881-1891

Box 19

Scope and Content

6 items

Envelopes ca. 1850-1895

Box 20

Scope and Content

2 folders

Letters not chronological 1870s

Box 20

Fragments of letters removed ca. 1860-1895

Box 20

Fragments ca. 1860-1985

Box 20

Scope and Content

2 folders

